

The Three Practices of Lent: Praying, Fasting, and Almsgiving

Session Focus

This session engages learners in unpacking the meaning of the three practices of Lent which Jesus named in the Gospel—prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Participants will make the connection between the season of Lent and the practices. They will experience concrete actions they can take to live the practices, and create their own actions to do at home.

Learning Objectives

“The Three Practices of Lent” preparation program guides learners of all ages to...

- develop a deeper understanding of praying, fasting, and almsgiving and their essential connection to the Lenten season
- live the practices of praying, fasting, and almsgiving during Lent and throughout the year
- develop an appreciation for the significance of praying, fasting, and almsgiving for their daily lives as Catholics in Lent and throughout the year

Session Overview

Part 1. (5 minutes) Gathering & Opening Prayer Service

Part 2. (20 minutes) All Ages Learning: Introduction to Lent

Part 3. (90 minutes) In Depth Learning Experience: Following Jesus Today

- Option 1. Whole Group Format: All participants remain in the same room.
- Option 2. Age Groups Format: Participants go to separate rooms for parallel learning: families with children, adolescents, adults.
- Option 3. Learning Activity Centers Format: Participants rotate through selected activities in the same room or in separate rooms.

Part 4. (20-25 minutes) Sharing Learning Experiences

Part 5. (5 minutes) Closing Prayer Service

Design Options for In-Depth Learning

Option 1. Whole Group Format

This format guides the entire assembly through each of the learning experiences. You might choose this format if you have:

- a large physical space with good acoustics/sound system and furniture to comfortably accommodate the learners
- a competent large group facilitator/master of ceremonies able to provide clear directions and to manage the dynamics and energy of a large group
- a group of leaders who feel comfortable moving through the assembly offering assistance, or a large enough team of table leaders to have one leader work with each table group
- a learning topic that lends itself to everyone learning the same thing as the same time, but in different ways, in the same space

Facilitation Tips for this Format:

Guide small groups through each of the activities at the same time.

- Organize people into table groups based on age groupings: families with children (grades 1-5), middle school adolescents, high school adolescents, young adults, and adults.
- The lead facilitator guides the entire group through each of the learning experiences. All presentations and activity instructions are given to the whole group.
- The age-appropriate learning activities within each learning experience are conducted in table groups.
- Where needed, small group leaders facilitate the work of the table groups.

Option 2. Age Group Format

This format provides for three separate parallel learning programs. Though age groups are separated, each one is focusing on the same topic. You might choose this format if you have:

- an adequate number of meeting spaces for the various groups to gather
- an adequate number of competent facilitators to work with each group
- a topic that is best explored through age-specific learning

Facilitation Tips for This Format

- Organize participants into three or more parallel learning groups: families with children (grades 1-5), adolescents (grades 6-12), and adults.
- If there are a large number of adolescents, divide them into two groups: middle school and high school.

Organize separate groups for young adults, adults, and older adults. Or you can give the adults their own choice for forming small groups.

- Direct the adolescents and adults into small groups. Give them all the handouts and learning materials needed for the learning experiences
- Guide the families with children into table groups of two or more families. Give each table all the handouts and learning materials necessary for the learning experiences.
- A facilitator must guide all the of the families through each learning experience, while small group leaders move from table to table assisting.

Option 3. Learning Activity Centers

The Learning Activity Center Format provides structured learning activities at a variety of stations or centers in a common area. Learning activity centers are self-contained learning experiences, focusing on a specific topic or theme. They include brief presentations by the facilitators, interactive and experiential

activities, group discussion and sharing. Each center can utilize a different learning method, such as drama or role play, creative arts, prayer, ritual, film, games, demonstrations, exhibits, and music.

One of the best ways to envision a Learning Activity Center Format is to imagine visiting a children's museum or one of the Epcot pavilions at Walt Disney World in Orlando. You will find a variety of interactive, experiential exhibits, media presentations, and staff-facilitated learning activities.

Learning Activity Centers can be used with all age groups. They can be developed for an intergenerational audience or for particular age groups, such as families with children or adolescents or adults. Learning Activity Centers can also be utilized in the families with children learning program within the Age Group Format.

Scheduling

Learning Activity Centers are designed to be conducted within a 20-30 minute timeframe. Depending on the session design, this will allow three or four learning periods to be offered during the In Depth Learning Experience.

Here is a sample schedule with four rounds of learning centers:

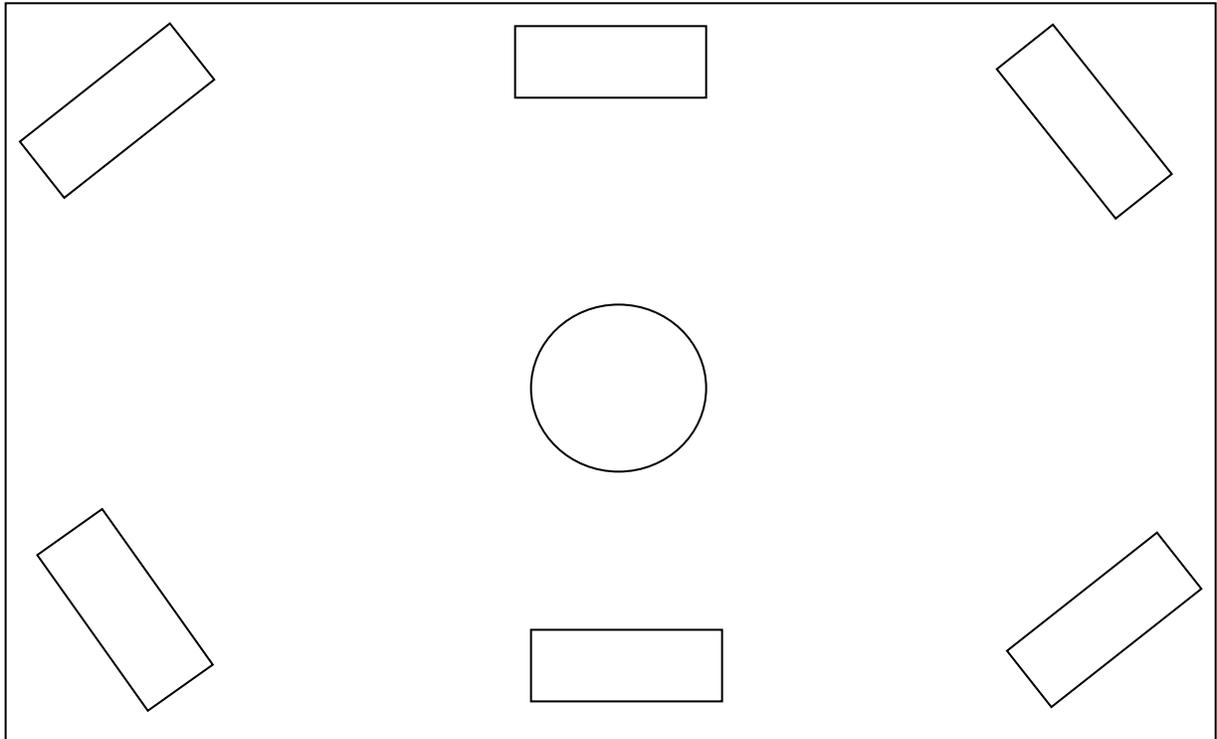
- 6:00 Hospitality and Dinner
- 6:30 Part 1. Gathering and Prayer
Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience
- 6:50 Round 1: Learning Activity Centers
- 7:15 Break (move to next center)
- 7:20 Round 2: Learning Activity Centers
- 7:45 Break (move to next center)
- 7:50 Round 3: Learning Activity Centers
- 8:15 Break (move to next center)
- 8:20 Round 4: Learning Activity Centers
- 8:45 Part 4: Presenting the Home Activities (no small group sharing)
Part 5: Closing Prayer

Here is a sample schedule with three rounds of learning centers:

- 6:00 Hospitality and Dinner
- 6:30 Part 1. Gathering and Prayer
Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience
- 7:00 Round 1: Learning Activity Centers
- 7:25 Break (move to next center)
- 7:30 Round 2: Learning Activity Centers
- 7:55 Break (move to next center)
- 8:00 Round 3: Learning Activity Centers
- 8:25 Break (gather in intergenerational groups)
- 8:30 Part 4: Sharing Learning Reflections and Home Application
- 8:50 Closing Prayer

Organizing the Activity Centers

There are two ways to set up activity centers: one large room, or multiple break-out rooms. If you arrange all of the learning centers in one large meeting gym or church hall, set-up the centers around the outside of the room (see example). The center space can become a storytelling center with a carpet or chairs for children to sit. The example below shows six different learning centers plus the storytelling center. You may still need separate rooms if you have a learning center that focuses on prayer (worship space) or shows a film (meeting room).



Keep in mind the following when organizing in one room:

- Make sure there is adequate space between learning centers so that people are not interrupted by the activity at other centers.
- Set-up each learning activity center with tables and chairs (or carpeted floor space) for participants to listen, discuss, and create. Children and teens can use the floor, but adults will need chairs.
- Assign each learning center a number and post the number on the wall and floor at each center.

If you arrange learning centers in multiple rooms such as meeting rooms, classrooms, church hall, gym, worship space, assign one learning center to each space. This format resembles a conference where people move from room to room for each session. Place the learning center name outside each room and develop a list of centers with locations, and a map if necessary, so that people can easily find the correct room.

Organizing Groups

Once you have determined how many learning centers you will offer, you can organize participants accordingly. If you offer four learning centers, you can organize the participants into four groups of equal size and assign each group a specific sequence that they will move through the learning centers. Assign a number to each learning center and an alphabet letter to each group, then describe how they will move through the centers: Group A: 1-2-3-4; Group B: 2-3-4-1, Group C: 3-4-1-2, and Group D: 4-1-2-3. If you offer three learning centers, there would be three groups rotating among the three learning centers. Keep families together in one group.

If you offer more than three or four learning centers, allow people to choose the learning centers they are going to experience. Remind them that if a particular center is crowded, they can move to another center and then return to their first choice in another round. Families with children should stay together because the activities require parents to work with their children.

Staffing

Each center is facilitated by a team of facilitators/catechists who guide the participants through the activity plan. The teaching team facilitates the overall learning plan for the center: making presentations, guiding learning activities, organizing discussions, and so on. The number of team members needed depends on the complexity of the activities and the number of participants at a learning center. Teams should have at least two or three people, but some centers will require five or six people. Older adolescents can also serve as members of the teaching team, and are especially valuable in facilitating creative activities and dramatic presentations.

To present the focus of each learning activity center, ask the teaching teams to present a very brief overview of what they will be doing in each center. Give each participant the list of learning activity centers with short descriptions, a schedule and the locations of the centers.

Materials Needed

Gathering

- Name tags
- Prayer table with symbols of Lent:
 - purple tablecloth (or one with purple in the pattern or drape a piece of purple cloth on a white tablecloth)
 - Bible
 - thick white candle, clear glass bowl with water, a small clear bowl with olive oil, loaf of bread (unsliced) on a plate, clear glass with wine, cross (not a crucifix), palms and ashes, thorns

All Ages Opening Learning Experience

- Bible

In-Depth Learning Experience

- Glue, scissors, pens, markers, flip chart paper
- Handout

Session Plan

Part 1. Gathering (5 minutes)

Registration and Hospitality

- Welcome people and ask them to sign in for the program.
- Ask people to make a nametag.
- Distribute the handouts for the session. (You can also distribute handouts for the In-Depth Learning program at the beginning of the activity.)
- Invite people to share a meal; depending on time of day, the program may end with a meal instead.

Welcome the participants to the program and introduce the theme of the session in these or your own words.

In this session, we will be unpacking the meaning of the three practices of Lent which Jesus named in the Gospel—prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. You will be making the connection between the season of Lent and each of the practices. We will experience concrete actions you can take to live the practices, and then create your own actions to do at home.

1. Group Formation

Organize people into intergenerational small groups of approximately eight people for the All Ages Learning Experience. Ask all members of the same family to sit together in these intergenerational groups. Each group should have as many of the following categories as possible: family (parents, children, teens), young adults, adults without children, and older adults. If members of the same family are intergenerational—children, teens, parents, and grandparents—keep them together in one group.

For the In Depth Learning Experience (Part 3), organize the participants into three types of table groups: family clusters of two or more families, groups of adolescents, and groups of adults.

2. Opening Prayer

Gather

Sing *Throughout These 40 Days, O Lord* or another Lenten song which is familiar to your congregation.

Listen

Matthew 6:1-18

Respond

Leader: Jesus, as we enter into Lent, we recall your willingness to suffer and die for each one of us. We are grateful for this wondrous gift.

All: We thank you, Lord.

Leader: Help us to be people of prayer, listening to you so that we too may follow the will of the Father as you did.

All: We ask you to help us, Lord.

Leader: We praise you, we thank you, we beseech you, and we ask your forgiveness.

All: Hear our prayers, O Lord.

Leader: Help us to fast from all that keeps us far from you and to feast on all that brings us closer to your heart.

All: Give us strength, O Lord.

Leader: Help us to follow in your footsteps, reaching out to the poor and vulnerable in our community and our world, sharing our resources of time and treasure with them.

All: Give us generous and compassionate hearts, O Lord.

Leader: Loving Redeemer, be with us throughout this holy season as we reflect on your unconditional love and forgiveness. Help us to be people of prayer, people who fast from things which keep us from you, and people who reach out to help our brothers and sisters in need. Amen.

Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience: Introduction to Lent (20 minutes)

Preparation

Invite a “Lenten Witness Panel” of parishioners of different ages to tell a personal story of Lent (e.g., a story of “conversion” or change, a story of personal or family Lenten traditions of fasting, service, or prayer).

Activity

Begin by introducing everyone to the season of Lent:

Lent is the season of the church year from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. Lent is a time of growing closer to God, turning away from sin into the loving arms of our God. The Lenten season challenges us to...

- hear and follow God’s call.
- take time to pray and seek God’s guidance in our lives.
- turn more fully to God.
- treat our neighbors with love through acts of justice, compassion, and service.
- take time to consider our choices and look at our relationships for ways to be more loving, more fair, more forgiving, and more compassionate.
- take time to share God’s love through acts of service and justice.
- renew our belief in the Easter promise that we share in Jesus’ resurrection.
- prepare for renewing our baptismal promises during the Easter liturgies.

The season of Lent gives us the opportunity to grow closer to God. There are three ways we can grow closer to God during Lent—by praying, by serving (traditionally called almsgiving), and by fasting. Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, like the legs of a tripod, make up the traditional practices of Lent. Praying nourishes our spirits. Fasting teaches us about sacrifice. And works of service and almsgiving enlarge our hearts as we serve the needs of others.

Introduce the Lenten Witness Panel and have the members share their experiences of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving in previous Lenten seasons. Close by thanking the panel for their words of wisdom.

Part 3. In-Depth Learning Experiences (90 minutes)

Families with Children Learning Experiences

Families with Children Learning Experiences

1. The Practice of Praying
2. The Practice of Fasting
3. The Practice of Almsgiving/Service

1. The Practice of Praying

Preparation

Choose which prayer experience you will offer participants or set up prayer centers for learners to experience different ways to pray during Lent. Handouts #11 through #16 provide the options.

Materials Needed

- Handouts #2, #3, #7, #8, #9, #11, #12, #13, #14, #15, #16 (depending on which prayer experience(s) you choose)
- Handouts #4 and #6 if you choose the Pledge to end the session
- Handout #17 copied on lilac-colored paper and cut into strips, one per participant; glue or tape

Activity

For each prayer experience you choose, follow these steps.

Describe the practice in the words provided or in your own words:

All the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) tell us that Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert where he fasted and prayed for 40 days. As disciples, we seek to follow St. Paul's call to "pray always." Lent is a time when we concentrate our prayer on the double meaning of the season: conversion from our sinful ways and renewal of our baptismal promises.

Invite participants to talk in their table groups about prayer at home using questions such as:

- When do you pray? Is prayer part of your everyday life?
- What do you pray for or pray about?
- Why do you think prayer is an important part of the Lenten season?
- Why should prayer be an important part of life?

Give participants an experience of prayer. You may choose to set up prayer centers where learners can choose a prayer experience or you may facilitate a prayer experience at the table groups. Use a prayer activity from the handouts—Handout #11: Scripture Meditation, Handout #12: Intercessory Prayer, Handout #13: Prayer of Forgiveness, Handout #14: Prayers of Praise, Handout #15: Praying with the Psalms, Handout #16: Praying through Music.

Pass out Handout #2 to children and Handout #3 to parents. Review the prayer ideas on the handouts. Invite table groups to discuss which ideas they feel would be most helpful to them.

To conclude the prayer activity, select one of the following two activities.

Lenten Pledge

Pass out Handouts #4 and #6. Ask learners to write, cut and paste, or draw the ideas they have selected onto the Lenten Pledge – either as an individual or as a family. Explain that children and parents should pick out several prayer activities to do—alone or together with their family. Ask the participants to share one or two ideas they have selected with their group.

Lenten Chain

Pass out the strips of paper from Handout #17. The learners can assemble the Lenten chain during the session. They should put the Lenten Chain in their room or in a special place in the house. Instruct them to tear off a link of the chain at home each day of Lent and read the activity for the day. Ask them to put the completed activities in a special container. As Easter draws nearer, the chain gets shorter.

2. The Practice of Fasting

Preparation

This activity uses the annual Operation Rice Bowl project with children. Operation Rice Bowl is Catholic Relief Services' Lenten program of prayer, fasting, education, and almsgiving. It includes prayer, fasting, education, and almsgiving. Obtain a set of materials for each child (and family) by going online to: <https://www.csricebowl.org>.

Materials Needed

- Handouts #1, #2, #3, #4, and #6

Activity

Invite participants to share what they think fasting is and why we fast with questions such as:

- What does fasting mean to you?
- Do you ever fast? Give examples.
- Why do you think fasting is an important part of the Lenten season?

Describe the practice using the words provided or your own words:

Fasting is an integral part of Lent. Traditionally it has included reducing the amount of food we eat and abstaining from meat.

But why do we fast? Not because our bodies and appetites are something evil that need to be punished, but to allow our physical hunger to remind us of our spiritual hunger, our need for God. Our Lenten fasting is modeled on Jesus' 40-day fast in the desert. Just as he fasted in preparation for his baptism in the Jordan and his public ministry, we fast to remind ourselves of our baptismal commitment and need for renewal.

The purpose of fasting is to turn our attention to both God and others. Fasting reminds us not only of our dependence on God, but also of the needs of the hungry and poor. By fasting, we place ourselves in solidarity with suffering people everywhere.

While we usually fast by eating less, fasting can take many forms. Fasting can be holding back from unnecessary buying, accumulating, and wasting, from excessive TV or YouTube viewing, etc. It can be an ecological fasting that fosters respect for natural resources and for all of creation. Any form of fasting can be a break from destructive patterns of life, freeing us to grow healthier in our thoughts and actions as Catholics.

Review the fasting ideas on Handout #2 for children and Handout #3 for parents/adults. Or use Handout #1 to help participants decide what they want to fast from and what they want to feast on. Give families time to select which practices they want to do during Lent.

Ask participants to write, cut and paste, or draw the ideas they have selected onto the Lenten Pledge (Handouts #4 and #6). Explain that children and parents should pick out several fasting activities to do—alone or together with their family.

Ask participants to share one or two ideas they have selected with the group.

3. The Practice of Almsgiving

Preparation

Add local service projects to Handouts #1, #2, and #3. This will provide people with specific things they can do during Lent in your church community and the larger community.

Materials Needed

- Handouts #2, #3, #4, and #6

Activity

Describe the practice of almsgiving in your own words or in the words provided:

The prophet Isaiah tells us that God wants a fast which involves “releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own” (Isaiah 58:6-7). Almsgiving or service is an essential Lenten practice.

Our faith calls us to work for justice; to serve those in need; to pursue peace; and to defend the life, dignity, and rights of all our sisters and brothers. This is the call of Jesus, the challenge of the prophets, and the living tradition of our church.

Lent is a time for repentance and action. We are called to serve those in need and use our wealth, gifts, time, and talents to create a world that mirrors the vision that Jesus proclaimed. Lent is a good time to cultivate a spirit of gratitude for what we have. Our most precious commodities—health, friendship, love, the beauty of creation—are pure gifts from God. Without these our material

possessions are worthless. Gratitude for what we have prompts us to do something for those in need, not out of guilt, but out of compassion. Compassion and generosity towards others involve giving not only from our surplus, but also from our substance.

Invite participants to talk about almsgiving/service using questions such as:

- How are you or your family involved in serving others? Share a story or examples.
- Why do you think service is an important part of the Lenten season?
- Why should service be an important part of your life?

Give participants examples of how they can serve others during Lent.

First, introduce the Operation Rice Bowl Kit and explain how they can use the Rice Bowl during Lent. Distribute the Operation Rice Bowl materials from Catholic Relief Services to the children and parents. Operation Rice Bowl is Catholic Relief Services' Lenten program of prayer, fasting, education, and almsgiving. CRS describes these components in the following way:

- **Prayer**—When we pray for others, we grow closer to them. Pray for the poor throughout Lent.
- **Fasting**—Fasting has been a symbolic act of prayer since early Christianity. By fasting, we share the suffering and hunger of the poor, gaining a clearer understanding of them and growing in solidarity.
- **Education**—To understand and empathize with the poor, it is necessary to learn about their condition. Through Operation Rice Bowl, we learn about their reality with stories, facts, food, and sharing.
- **Almsgiving**—Alms are money given out of religious motivation for the needs of the poor. Alms are a special way of building solidarity. Operation Rice Bowl alms help the poor grow their own food, increase their income, and escape abject poverty.

Second, present additional ideas for almsgiving/service. Review the almsgiving/service ideas on Handout #2 for children and #3 for adults with the families. Allow time for families to decide which actions they want to take to serve others during Lent.

Ask them to write, cut and paste, or draw the ideas they have selected onto Handouts #4 and #6. Explain that participants should pick out several service activities to do—alone and together with others.

Ask the participants to share one or two ideas they have selected with the group.

Adolescent & Adult Learning Experience: Three Practices of Lent

Preparation

In advance, write the following questions on newsprint so everyone can read them.

- What comes to mind when you hear the word, “Lent?” What are some of the things you remember about Lent?
- What are some of the things the Church asks us to do during Lent?
- What do you think is the importance or significance of Lent?

Add prayer and church services that your community will be conducting during Lent, such as Stations of the Cross, to Handout #3. Also add church activities that promote fasting or simple meals during Lent, such as a Lenten soup supper. Finally, include local service projects to the list of the handout. This will provide people with specific things they can do during Lent in your church community and the larger community.

Materials Needed

- Handouts #1, #3, and #6
- Newsprint and markers

Part 1. Exploring the Meaning of Lent

In the large group (or small groups of four or five participants), invite participants to share their responses to the following questions. Record the group’s response on the newsprint. If you use small groups, ask all of the group members to share their responses to the first question before moving on to the second, etc. Then ask for reports from each small group and post the responses on newsprint.

- What comes to mind when you hear the word, “Lent?” What are some of the things you remember about Lent?
- What are some of the things the Church asks us to do during Lent?
- What do you think is the importance or significance of Lent?

Provide a brief introduction to Lent using the text below or your own words:

The rich, liturgical color of royal purple cloaks the season of Lent in its penitential vesture. Simplicity and austerity quietly whisper images of the barren desert. Flowers are absent, music is sparse and the church quietly but firmly heralds its reflective “time out.” Things have noticeably changed. As people and as church, we enter the time of serious penitential and baptismal reflection. We take stock and assess our growth in the Christian life. We ask ourselves, “Where is there need for healing and reconciliation in our lives?”

Lent is a time of conversion, of metanoia, a complete turning away from sin into the living arms of our loving God. The Lenten season challenges us to...

- to hear and follow God’s call.
- to take time to pray and seek God’s guidance in our lives.
- to turn more fully to God which includes turning in love toward our neighbors through acts of justice, compassion, and service.

- take time to consider our choices and to look at our relationships for ways to be more loving, more fair, more forgiving, and more compassionate.
- take time to share God’s love through acts of service and justice.
- renew our belief in the Easter promise that we share in Jesus’ resurrection
- prepare for renewing our baptismal promises during the Easter services.

Lent is a serious season, since the opportunity to reflect on how we are living as disciples is important to our lives as Christians. However, Lent is not only serious and somber; there are also moments which are lighter and more joyous as we anticipate the resurrection of Jesus. As we observe Lent, we can be part of the serious reflection of the season and remember our joy! We keep our eyes and hearts fixed on the hope of Easter—we know how the story comes out!

Part 2. The Three Practices of Lent

Prayer: Introduce the practice of prayer using the words below or your own words:

All of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) tell us that Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert where he fasted and prayed for 40 days. As disciples, we seek to follow St. Paul’s call to “pray always.” Lent is a time when we concentrate our prayer on the double meaning of the season: conversion from our sinful ways and renewal of our baptismal promises.

Use the following questions to help the participants to reflect on their prayer life and then share their insights in small groups. Select as many questions as time allows.

- When do you pray? Is prayer part of your everyday life?
- What do you pray for or pray about?
- Why do you think prayer is an important part of the Lenten season?
- Why should prayer be an important part of your life?
- What kind of prayer life do you want to develop?

Review the prayer ideas on Handout #3 with the group. Invite the participants to add new prayer ideas to the Lenten Ideas on the handout. Write these ideas on newsprint.

Ask the participants to review all of the Lenten prayer ideas and to select ideas they will live this Lent. Play some instrumental or Lenten music in the background while participants review the handout and write their commitments on Handout #6.

Invite the participants to share one prayer idea from their pledge. If they have been working in small groups throughout the activity, ask participants to share one idea from their pledge with their group.

Fasting: Introduce the practice of fasting in your own words or using the text below:

Fasting is an integral part of Lent. Traditionally it has included reducing the amount of food we eat and abstaining from meat.

But why do we fast? Not because our bodies and appetites are something evil that need to be punished, but to allow our physical hunger to remind us of our spiritual hunger, our need for God.

Our Lenten fasting is modeled on Jesus' 40-day fast in the desert. Just as he fasted in preparation for his baptism in the Jordan and his public ministry, we fast to remind ourselves of our baptismal commitment and need for renewal.

The purpose of fasting is to turn our attention to both God and others. Fasting reminds us not only of our dependence on God, but also of the needs of the hungry and poor. By fasting, we place ourselves in solidarity with suffering people everywhere.

While we usually fast by eating less, fasting can take many forms. Fasting can be holding back from unnecessary buying, accumulating, and wasting, from excessive TV or YouTube viewing, etc. It can be an ecological fasting that fosters respect for natural resources and for all of creation. Any form of fasting can be a break from destructive patterns of life, freeing us to grow healthier in our thoughts and actions as Catholics.

Joyce Rupp writes that fasting can...

- free us so that we are not stuck in our weaknesses, addictions, prejudices, and illusions
- liberate us from the bondage of materialism and busyness
- loosen our unhealthy grasp on our need to always be right or be the best or the most successful
- clear away the inner clutter
- increase our self-control
- help us rearrange our priorities
- alert us to what needs to be changed in our lives
- unite us with the suffering of the world
- enhance our gratitude

(Lent—Giving Our Hearts to God. Joyce Rupp)

Use the following questions to help the participants reflect on the place of fasting in the Christian life and then share their insights in small groups. Select as many questions as time allows.

- What does fasting mean to you?
- Have you ever fasted? Why?
- What do you need to fast from?
- Why do you think fasting is such an important part of Lent?
- How can fasting during Lent deepen your faith as a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Use Handout #1 to give participants ideas for fasting from and feasting on during Lent.

Review the fasting ideas on Handout #3 with the group. Invite the participants to add new ideas to the Lenten Ideas on the handout. Write these ideas on newsprint.

Ask the participants to review all of the Lenten fasting ideas and to select ideas they will live this Lent. Play some instrumental or Lenten music in the background while participants review the handout. Invite them to write their commitments on Handout #6.

Invite the participants to share one fasting idea from their pledge. If they have been working in small groups throughout the activity, ask participants to share one idea from their pledge with their group.

Almsgiving/Service: Introduce the practice of almsgiving/service in your own words or using the text provided:

The prophet Isaiah tells us that God wants a fast which involves “releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own” (Isaiah 58:6-7). Almsgiving or service is an essential Lenten practice.

Our faith calls us to work for justice; to serve those in need; to pursue peace; and to defend the life, dignity, and rights of all our sisters and brothers. This is the call of Jesus, the challenge of the prophets, and the living tradition of our church.

Lent is a time for repentance and action. We are called to serve those in need and use our wealth, gifts, time, and talents to create a world that mirrors the vision that Jesus proclaimed. Lent is a good time to cultivate a spirit of gratitude for what we have. Our most precious commodities—health, friendship, love, the beauty of creation—are pure gifts from God. Without these our material possessions are worthless. Gratitude for what we have prompts us to do something for those in need, not out of guilt, but out of compassion. Compassion and generosity towards others involve giving not only from our surplus, but also from our substance.

Use the following questions to help the participants to reflect on their service to others and then share their insights in small groups. Select as many questions as time allows.

- How are you currently involved in service to others?
- Why are you (or should you) involved in service? Why should service be an important part of your life?
- What is your “wealth” that you can share with those in need today?
- Why do you think service is an important part of the Lenten season?
- How can you grow in your service to others? During Lent how can you move to action through works of justice and service to those in need?

Review the almsgiving/service ideas on Handout #3 with the group. Invite the participants to add new ideas to the Lenten Ideas on the handout. Write these ideas on newsprint.

Ask the participants to review all of the Lenten service ideas and to select ideas they will live this Lent. Play some instrumental or Lenten music in the background while participants review the handout and write their commitments on Handout #6.

Invite the participants to share one service idea from their pledge. If they have been working in small groups throughout the activity, ask participants to share one idea from their pledge with their group.

Conclusion

Conclude the activity plan by inviting the participants to take a moment and choose one word that reflects their personal hope for this Lent. Allow one or two minutes for quiet reflection, and then invite everyone to share the word or phrase to complete the sentence, “This Lent, I hope....”

Part 4. Sharing Learning Reflections (20 minutes)

Invite the participants to gather in intergenerational groups to share what they learned about Lent and the three Lenten practices and to share their ideas for fasting, praying, and almsgiving from their Lenten Pledges on Handouts #4 or #6. Use the following reflection to get participants to share:

Think of everything we have done in this session to learn about Lent and the three practices of Lent. Take a few minutes to reflect on what you have learned in this session:

- What is one thing you learned about Lent and the three practices that you did not know before?
- What will you look for when you participate in the Lenten Season in the parish community?
- How will you live the three practices in your life?
- Why does Lent mean to you now?

Part 5. Closing Prayer Service (5-10 minutes)

Gather

Dear Lord, the Lenten season begins. It is a time to be with you in a special way, a time to pray, to fast, and thus to follow you on your way to Jerusalem, to Golgotha, and to the final victory over death. Help us be attentive to you throughout this journey.

Listen

Isaiah 58:6-11

Respond

Invite each participant to quietly reflect on what they want to do to respond to God's invitation to walk with Jesus during this Lenten season.

Go Forth

Dear Lord, I am still so divided. I truly want to follow you, but I also want to follow my own desires and lend an ear to the voices that speak about prestige, success, human respect, pleasure, power, and influence. Help me to become deaf to these voices and more attentive to your voice, which calls me to choose the narrow road to life.

I know that Lent is going to be a very hard time for me. The choice for your way has to be made every moment of my life. I have to choose thoughts that are your thoughts, words that are your words, and actions that are your actions. There are no times or places without choices. And I know how deeply I resist choosing you.

Please, Lord, be with me at every moment and in every place. Give me the strength and the courage to live this season faithfully, so that, when Easter comes, I will be able to taste with joy the new life which you have prepared for me. Amen.

(Show Me the Way—Readings for Each Day of Lent. Henri Nouwen. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994, page 13.)